

POETRY PUTS US IN TOUCH WITH OURSELVES: WRITING *WARPAINT ANGEL*

I love the way the writing process is not solely an act of will. Much of it is subterranean, sometimes choosing unexpected words to wake us from sleepwalking or to explain our experience to ourselves. Even writing's silences, the fallow periods, have their reasons. If we respect its ways, writing can be a life-long companion, patient enough to hold our hand through every year's changes.

In her essay 'When we Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision' Adrienne Rich stated: 'poems are like dreams: in them you put what you don't know you know'. In the eighteen months or so before my marriage ended, when with my conscious mind and in my daily life I was working hard to repair and renew our relationship, I was writing poems whose metaphors included a woman in a fairy tale walking out on a wolf; a trapped starling beating its head against a window to get free; anger biting 'anything with a whiff of the human'; a short sequence focusing on fear in seven languages; rising 'like Adam from the valley in her side'; a male frog gripping a dead female frog in the act of mating. All signs and premonitions that the poetry-writing part of me was driven to express, but messages whose meaning my daily life was not yet prepared to decipher.

I would like to suggest there can be a 'fortune-telling' aspect to some poetry writing, where you write lines envisaging a life or event you haven't yet lived. This relates to Rich's statement in the same essay that: 'if the imagination is to transcend and transform experience it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives, perhaps to the very life you are living at that moment.'

Around 1982 I began writing a long poem called 'Warpaint Angel' about my mother's husband, the man I had seen and experienced as my father, who died in 1981. It became the title poem of my first collection several years later. It was a painful liberation to draft that poem, as if I were facing a central relationship I'd spent years avoiding. It ends with a fantasy:

I dream of meetings:
the grand reconciliation,
holding you, weeping,
as a father would a child.

In 1989 I met my natural father after thirty years. When we talked about the circumstances of my birth and childhood my father cried and I held him as he wept. The scene I described in 1982, without any hope of realising it, was enacted seven years later. When I showed my father the 'Warpaint Angel' poem he called the ending 'witchy'. My dictionary definition of a witch is 'a woman believed to have supernatural powers'. Perhaps tuning into the powers of our imaginations, and unleashing them in writing – even if we're not

fully conscious of where that writing is leading – puts us in touch with powers beyond the accepted laws of nature. It puts us in touch with ourselves.

Earlier versions of this text were first published in *The Therapeutic Potential of Creative Writing: Writing Myself* by Gillie Bolton (Jessica Kingsley, London, 1999) and *The Writer's Key: Introducing creative solutions for life* by Gillie Bolton (Jessica Kingsley, London, 2014).

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